

LA Times, January 23, 2005

WASHINGTON — Deferring to Afghan President Hamid Karzai, the Bush administration has backed off its plans to use aerial spraying to destroy Afghanistan's poppy crop, at least for the time being, administration officials and lawmakers said.

Instead, the United States will help develop alternative livelihoods for poor farmers, build up the police and counter-narcotics forces and pay teams of Afghans to cut and burn poppy fields by hand this spring to demonstrate that opium production will be a risky business in the new Afghanistan.

The State Department had asked Congress to earmark \$780 million in aid to Afghanistan for counter-narcotics programs, of which \$152 million had been earmarked for aerial eradication beginning this month.

There was division within the department and the National Security Council over the wisdom of spraying and whether the United States should use its powerful influence to overcome Karzai's opposition.

Supporters of spraying have argued that opium profits are swelling the coffers of warlords and enriching Taliban and possibly Al Qaeda elements as well. Critics, including senior U.S. diplomats and military officers in Afghanistan, warned that spraying would alienate the voters Karzai desperately needs in the parliamentary elections scheduled for this spring.

"Everybody supports an aggressive program on drugs including manual eradication, interdiction and alternative livelihoods," said a congressional source who asked to remain anonymous.

"But the idea of U.S. military helicopters swooping down on villagers ... stirred up memories of what the Russians did in the '80s," when Soviet helicopter gunships strafed villages.

Secretary of State-designate Condoleezza Rice, during her confirmation hearing last week, left the door open to spraying at some other time.

"At this point, manual [eradication] is all we can do, but we'll see whether aerial is needed," she said.

Rep. Mark Steven Kirk (R-Ill.), who met with Karzai during a recent trip to Afghanistan, said the United States had no choice but to back off because of the Afghan leader's objection to spraying before other anti-drug programs had been mounted.

But Kirk expressed some doubt that Karzai's public relations campaign to convince the public that opium production was a blight on the fledgling democracy would be sufficient. The United Nations has estimated that drug trafficking equals 60% of Afghanistan's legitimate gross domestic product.

"Aerial spraying is postponed," Kirk said. "Karzai has not ruled it out. He said he will revisit the issue if the current efforts fail."

State Department officials said Friday that they were still working out details of how the money that had been earmarked for aerial spraying would be used.

A new proposal is expected to be submitted to Congress within days, Capitol Hill sources said. In addition, the administration will ask for up to \$1 billion in aid for Afghanistan in a supplemental budget request in early February.

According to the Capitol Hill sources, some lawmakers and administration officials want to sharply increase the \$40 million that had been earmarked for planting other kinds of crops, and others want to spend more on manual eradication and other purposes.

Eradication teams will require armed protection, officials said. Some opium fields are ringed by landmines, and others are located on mountains from which trucks carrying eradication teams can be seen approaching miles away.

Another problem is that large-scale programs to give farmers an alternative to poppy cultivation won't be up and running until September, too late for this year's crop.

In the meantime, the United States has given \$500,000 for a one-time program to deliver wheat seeds and fertilizer to farmers in Nangarhar province, one of the major poppy-growing areas. And an American-paid contractor is providing some assistance in the Helmand River valley, where half of the world's heroin supply originates, Kirk said.

Kirk said he favored providing Afghan forces with U.S. helicopters that could be used to destroy drug laboratories. The labs can be identified by aircraft fitted with infrared sensors and flying at 20,000 feet, because opium processing emits a large amount of heat, he said.

"More money needs to be spent on public outreach and on going after drug labs and caches," Rep. Tom Lantos (D-San Mateo) said in a statement. "We must also realize that this is a long-term commitment, and not just a simple one-time expenditure. But this terrible trade is funding the Al Qaeda and Taliban forces that are shooting at our troops and trying to undermine the Karzai government. This is a battle we cannot afford to lose."

Immediately after his election, Karzai declared a jihad against drugs. He has enlisted an American public relations firm and tribal leaders and mullahs to help spread his anti-drug message.

Kirk said he was told that the campaign was resulting in a drop in poppy planting. But a State Department official said the newly planted poppies are now the size of cabbages and will not be distinguishable by air from other young crops for at least a month.

New York University professor Barnett R. Rubin, who served as a U.N. advisor in Afghanistan, said opium prices that had plummeted because of the bumper poppy harvest last year

quadrupled on the expectation that eradication would make for a smaller crop this year.

Because opium can be stored indefinitely and sold when the price is right, the traffickers "are big supporters of crop eradication right now," said Rubin, who argues that supporting other forms of rural development is a better investment.

"The net result of crop eradication will be a net transfer of income from opium growers to drug traffickers," he said.